ORM Corner

I Heard Something

By Lt. Marco Giorgi

It was another day of flight ops on cruise, mostly unit-level training, and it started to feel like Groundhog Day. We were scheduled to control air intercepts and a self-escort strike, just a walk in the park for our stacked crew. We had three qualified mission commanders in the back of the aircraft handling the mission, including our CO. Everyone except the copilot had cruise and combat experience.

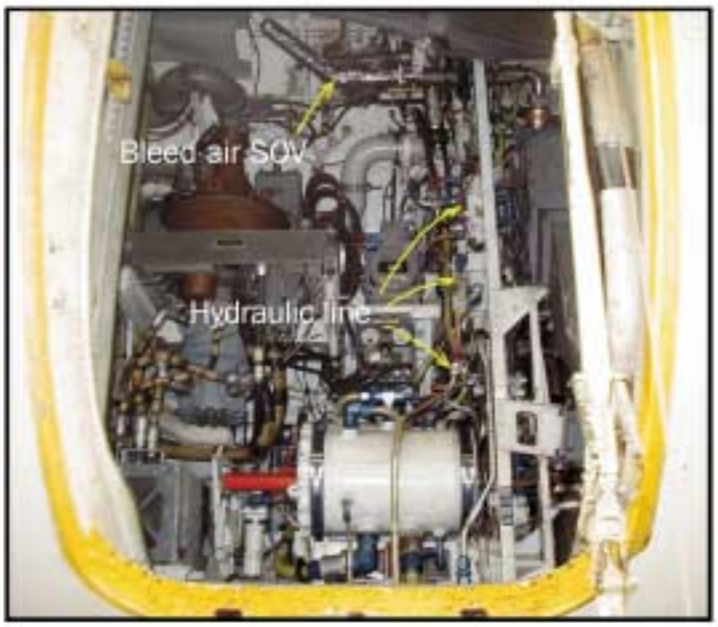
Immediately after the brief, our CO became the voice of reason and experience, reminding us not to allow ourselves to become lax. His words couldn't have come at a better time. Despite all our experience in the airplane, as we set to fly a benign unit-level training mission, our biggest enemy was a lax attitude.

We just had started our engines when we heard six short blasts of the ship's whistle, followed by a 5MC announcement, "Man overboard! Man overboard!"

What we didn't hear was, "This is a drill. This is a drill." This was no drill. One of the maintainers from the S-3 squadron had been blown overboard off elevator 2. Everyone reached for their radio-select panel to listen to the recovery details on tower frequency—everyone except the skipper. He was focused on a noise he heard coming from the forward equipment compartment (FEC). Of course, nobody else in the aircraft heard it.

The skipper immediately brought us back to reality. Since I was sitting in the seat nearest the FEC, I went forward to investigate. As I entered the FEC, I could hear the noise: a loud hissing growing louder as I went forward. After passing the main-entrance hatch, the sound started to decrease. I backed up and started to investigate. I checked every line that carried any type of gas and found the leak at the bleed-air shutoff valve in the fuselage. The air coming out was very hot and near a bundle of wires.

We called the troubleshooters and discussed the problem. We concluded the leak would not be a quick fix. They said there was a great potential for fire. That was enough for us. We called it a day and went below



to debrief the chain of events that could have led to one of those hair-raising *Approach* articles. Or it might have been one of those editorials from Grandpa what's-his-name in that other magazine.

What could have happened is scary. The leak was in an area packed with electrical wiring, hydraulic lines, filters, reservoirs, nitrogen lines, and a radar tube that blasts out 1.21 jigawatts of power—when it's on. (Okay, not quite that much power, but it's a lot). It is adjacent to the area through which we would have to egress should a fire get out of control. A fire in the E-2 is bad enough, but a fire in this area of the E-2 can be catastrophic.

However, thanks to one crew member's situational awareness, assertiveness and communication, we broke a chain of events that could have been fatal. Yes, we lost a sortie, but we possibly saved five lives and an expensive airplane, and avoided a bunch of paperwork. All that aside, what did I learn from this episode?

First, an experienced crew who doesn't feel overly tasked can be a dangerous thing. A lax attitude can be a killer. Second, I learned you have to pay attention to what deserves your attention. You can't allow yourself to be distracted. Third, I realized when anyone breaks a chain of events, it can lead to disaster. You just need to listen, not only for strange sounds but to other people's input. Sure, it's easy to listen to the skipper. When he says he heard something, you check it out. How about listening to a nugget? If you want the kind of response a skipper gets, you have to maintain your situational awareness, be assertive, communicate, and exercise some leadership (speak up and get someone to act).

We brief ORM before every flight, but the real test of a solid program is to practice it as a matter of course, automatically doing the things we brief. In this case, we did, it worked, and I flew later that day anyway. Nothing lost, and a lot was gained by using ORM the way we were trained.

Lt. Giorgi flies with VAW-124.